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Taylor Whittington

*Eastern Illinois University*

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First-Generation, Second Year, College Students and Support Gained from Campus Services

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(TITLE)

BY

Taylor Whittington

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**THESIS**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF

**Masters of Science in College Student Affairs**

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IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY  
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

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### **Abstract**

First-generation college students face many challenges when coming into higher education. This qualitative study was designed to gain an understanding of how first-generation college students utilize resources on campus in support of trying to work through their challenges and gain their successes. Chickering and Reisser's (1993) theory of identity development was used to better understand the development of first-generation college students during their transition and first year at the institution. The researcher interviewed five first-generation college students who identified as Caucasian and were in their second year of college. The results from the study showed that first-generation students rely heavily on the resources available to them at the institution. Participants discussed the value and need for faculty, peers, and campus offices and how these offices played a key role in their experience at the institution.

*Keywords:* First-Generation college student, College student support & challenge, campus resources

### **Dedication**

I would like to dedicate this to Christopher Hallam. Although you were only my supervisor for a short period of time, I was able to learn so many things from you. I want to say thank you for blindly taking a chance on me and providing me an outstanding opportunity to work with you. You were able to show me it is not scary to move up in the world of student affairs, how to have an impact in everything we do, and how to continually stay positive no matter the situation at hand. You have been a large supporter of mine, and you have pushed me to be a better individual. I cannot thank you enough for everything you have done for me. I wish there was more time and opportunity to be able to learn from you, but I know you have helped me start on the right path. You are truly an inspiration to me and others, and you will continue to be through the hard work and dedication you put forth in your life. I will always be proud to call you a mentor and a friend.

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This process has had many ups and downs, as well as challenges along the way, and without some key individuals, this process would not have been a success. I would like to start by thanking my thesis advisor, Dr. Dianne Timm. Through your help, support, and pushing I honestly don't know if I would have completed this without your guidance. To Dr. Jenny Sipes and Cindy Boyer, thank you for sitting on my committee and helping me improve my writing and myself through this process.

I would like to acknowledge my mother, father, Nicole, and Brian. You all have pushed me to continue on through this process and kept telling me I could do it when I honestly thought I could not. Your love and support has helped me get to this milestone in my life and I cannot express how appreciative I am of each of you every day. I always know that whatever the next step is in my journey, you will be by my side as my support system.

I would also like to acknowledge Kelsey Cripe. You have truly been an amazing friend and mentor these past six years; I am so appreciative of everything you have done for me. You have always been in my corner throughout undergraduate and graduate school and I know you always will be even after my time at EIU is done. There have been countless times I have learned something from you and you have helped me. I never know if I actually tell you thank you enough. So, thank you! Thank you for being a fantastic friend, and thank you for helping push me through this process.



## CHAPTER I

### **Introduction**

Attending a university used to be the unattainable goal for many in the United States and was seen as a privilege reserved for the wealthy and well educated (Callanta & Ortiz, 2009). Now, it has become more of a necessity. It has become an expectation. Today, everyone goes to college in order to obtain a certificate or a degree to be able to offer something to society (Davis, 2010). The goal of most institutions is to graduate students in two or four years based on the institution type. According to Supiano (2014), only 58.2 percent of students actually graduate from a post-secondary institution. This could be due to the fact that students are coming into college and may not necessarily be prepared for this type of environment (Lohfinks & Paulsen, 2005). It could also be due to the different populations of students who are coming into college at an increasing rate (Davis, 2010). One of these groups is first-generation students.

First-generation students are typically students whose parents have had no college or post-secondary experiences (Woosley & Shepler, 2011). They are coming into higher education at a disadvantage because these students have few resources to guide them through the transition process, help them determine what college life will be like, and identify what to expect along with what will be expected of them (Jenkins, Belanger, Connally, Boals, & Duron, 2013). They are also coming into a system which essentially was never built for them (Davis, 2010). This could lead them to face multiple challenges during their time at the institution. Some of the challenges they may have to overcome include financial aid illiteracy, family achievement guilt, lower grade point averages and test scores, little to no social support, low life satisfaction, and getting involved on

campus (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2014; Jamelske, 2009; Jenkins, et al., 2013; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). Not only are they dealing with these challenges once they get to college, but the potential barriers they came into the institution with in the first place also play a role within their experience (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2014). Some of these barriers could be coming from a low socioeconomic background, being part of a minority population, not being at the same educational level as their peers, or having a family that is unable to aid them with the little resources and knowledge they have (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2014). Because of this, it is important for first-generation students to be able to find some form of support or aid that will guide them through their experience.

Since first-generation students do not have these resources from home, they have to look at other avenues within the institution. Having a mentor could be one of those ways of doing so. It has been found that students who had a mentor through their college experience are more likely to graduate (Stieha, 2009). That person could be able to point the student to other resources on campus who can offer them more support in various ways. Being able to gain help from different entities and offices on campus can help the student become more understanding of how the university works and get them more involved because of the things they know. What is it these offices are able to provide for these students, and how are they really helping them in order to be successful within the institution? It is hard to try and gear everything toward a certain population and this study is interested in determining how first-generation students utilize the resources provided by an institution.

**Statement of Purpose**

The motivation behind this study comes from my own experiences as a first-generation college student. Both of my parents attended different universities but only attended for a short time. Neither of them actually received a degree, until just recently when my mother earned her associates degree. When going through the process of trying to find an institution, both of them were very supportive of my choice to go to college and the different institutions I was considering. When initially making the decision on where I was going to attend, I had to consider a couple of things. I wanted to make sure it was within my family's price range, since my parents were paying for my education. Another factor was the semi close proximity to my home, in case I needed to go home in order to be able to help my family. I chose the institution I attended because I felt I could fit in with the rest of the student population and would be successful with what I wanted to do academically.

During my first semester, I struggled greatly. I did not really understand different things, such as financial aid, and I found it hard to navigate the institution socially and academically. At that point, I was unaware of what a first-generation college student was or that I was even considered one. I was not feeling successful and was not enjoying my experience. I had determined my major was one of the main issues impacting my experience. I was struggling in my classes and was unable to identify what support I needed or was available for me. There was a faculty member who reached out to me because he saw me struggling and became a mentor to me. He directed me to explore different options, which led to changing my major. During this period and through the changes occurring in my life, I became more comfortable and started to branch out more.

I was able to create connections with my peers and become integrated within different organizations and the campus as a whole.

Because of my experience with being supported by both a faculty member and my family when going through this process, I found it was most important for me to stay and continue my education. As this is just my experience, the purpose of this study was to understand first-generation students' stories and identify what support systems and resources they may need or use in order to be successful at the institution and obtain their degree.

### **Research Questions**

This study was guided by the following research questions:

RQ 1: How do first-generation students learn about the resources and support available on campus?

RQ 2: What types of support do first-generation students utilize on campus?

RQ 3: In what ways are first-generation students challenged in college?

RQ 4: How do first-generation students describe their successes in college?

### **Significance of the Study**

This study is important because it will help gain a better understanding of what first-generation students need from the university. It also identifies which services first-generation students are using and those they are not; along with this it was important to understand how they learn about these resources. It is necessary to understand, from first-generation students' perspectives, how they perceive the university is supporting them during their time at the institution. First-generation students have a lack of knowledge as to what college is going to be like since they are unlikely to have the resources to help

them understand what the experience will truly be for them once on campus (Jehangir, 2008).

### **Limitations**

As with any study, there were several limitations. This was a qualitative study limited to a single Midwestern campus, which means it may not provide the best results for different universities because of the location and the population of students on campus. Only second year students were participants for the study, which greatly limits the population to a specific group of individuals. The experiences this class of students has are going to be very different than those with more years at the institution because they have had only a year to experience college and the resources provided at the institution. Students with more experience may have had more opportunities to utilize various resources; however, this study focused solely on the first year of experience and their transition to college.

Choosing a single race, in this case Caucasian, limits the population even further. Many of the studies that are done on first-generation students are looking at students who identify with a minority population. It would be difficult to try and encompass all minorities and majorities within one thesis study as all of their life experiences are going to be different and may impact the way they respond to the questions in this study. Jones and Abes (2013) created a model of multiple dimensions of identity. The way they explain this model is through the use of an atom. The purpose of this model is to show the salient identities, or the most important identities, around the core of the individual. The core of an individual is made up of their personal attributes, personal characteristics, and personal identity (Jones & Abes, 2013). Some of the layers that surround the core

that can make up a person's identity are their sexual orientation, culture, religion, race, class, and gender (Jones & Abes, 2013). Those that are closest to the core are those that are the most important to the person. Some identities can be more salient than others in the individual's life (Jones & Abes, 2013). That is why removing one of those layers is helpful to better understand the student's self and experience.

I bring bias to the topic being researched since I identify with the population being sampled. Being aware of the bias allowed me to appreciate the experiences the participants had and allowed for their own voice and experiences to come out (Jehangir, 2008). Being aware of and accounting for bias makes this study more credible. Reflecting on how my attitudes or beliefs may influence my perception is a way of getting rid of any form of bias I may have toward this topic (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2011).

### **Defining the First-Generation Student**

Throughout much of the research, the term first-generation student is defined in various ways; however, the most common theme among them all is the student is the first person in their family to attend college (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2014; Jamelske 2009; Jenkins et al., 2013; Olson, 2014; Petty, 2014; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). Where the definitions tend to differ is at what stage of academic achievement the students' parents actually achieved. One definition of a first-generation student is, "a student whom neither parent attended a four-year institution" (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014 p. 46). Another definition is when one or both parents have attended an institution of higher learning for a period of time but did not complete a degree (Petty, 2014). Also, some researchers have created another definition which addresses the parents of the student potentially receiving their GED or

an associate's degree but still not acquiring a bachelor's degree or higher, making these students first-generation students (Olson, 2014).

One of the issues with these definitions is the lack of identifying what is considered to be higher education. There is some uncertainty if in these definitions whether two year institutions are considered or if four year institutions are the only ones taken into account. This could then change how the definition of this student population would look. Another problem with these definitions is the instance where these students are attending an institution and while they are attending, their parent goes and gets a degree. Then is the student who once was identified as a first-generation student no longer classified as being one? According to Stieha (2008), she would say they are still a first-generation student.

For the purpose of this study, a definition of neither parent having earned a degree from a four-year institution was used. Although it is understood every student experience will be very different regarding how they got to college and the different opportunities they have on campus, students falling under this definition will have more similarities rather than the other definitions as to how they started their journey.

### **Summary**

First-generation students are a growing population in higher education institutions. They may lack knowledge of what one of these institutions may be like because they do not have the awareness of resources necessary in helping them understand how to navigate their college experience. These students turn to different resources and support systems in order to become successful. Chapter II will present a review of the relevant literature.

## CHAPTER II

### **Literature Review**

The following is a review of literature focusing on the different support systems a first-generation student has accessible to them while attending a higher education institution. This chapter will review the characteristics and barriers first-generation students face, including the campus environment, and the support provided. In understanding the first-generation student experience, the theoretical framework of aspects of Chickering and Reisser's (1993) Theory of Identity Development will be explained.

#### **First-Generation Students**

For most students in higher education, the goal is to graduate. For first-generation students, this could be a very difficult process to get through for a variety of reasons. Research has shown first-generation students are more likely to drop out, more likely to take longer to graduate, and end up getting less out of their education (Davis, 2010; Lohfinks & Paulsen, 2005; Housel, 2012; Sanacore & Palumbo, 2015; Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Terenzini et. al, 1996; Stephens et. al, 2012; Petty, 2014). This could be due to many factors, like a lack of knowledge or support which could influence how they achieve success and the ultimate goal of graduating. One of those reasons for this is a lack of support from their personal networks, which could include friend or peer groups, family members, community members, or mentors (Davis, 2010). First-generation students face many barriers when gaining access to higher education. There is the possibility of first-generation students having to balance work and life, if they are able to; on top of the academic and involvement components which come with being a part of an institution of higher education (Korsmo, 2014). Each student's background and family



structure is going to look very different and provide different life experiences for each of them; however, some similarities have been presented which can help institutions identify how to meet their needs (Davis, 2010).

**Barriers.** Many of the barriers first-generation students go through are unique to each student. A barrier, also known in much of literature as an obstacle, is something not allowing for progress or is something getting in the way of the intended goal (Olson, 2014). It is important to understand the challenges these students face before institutions can address them. For these students, this may be the first time anyone in their family has tried to attain an educational level this high. The college selection journey in to the institution is going to be different from student to student (Woosley & Shepler, 2011). However, some may share commonalities through factors of race, economic status, and family type, just to name a few. Another thing they all have in common is the fact each of them is straddling between two different worlds. The students are straddling the world in which they came from and that of higher education (Petty, 2014; Housel, 2012).

Much of the research conducted on first-generation students looks at students who identify with a racial minority as well as identifying as low socio-economic status (SES), which adds to the challenges they may already be facing in coming to college (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Cushman, 2007; Jehangir, 2008). Because of this, students' backgrounds can have a direct impact on the way they integrate into the institution and how invested they feel in the institution. This could also lead to feeling like an outsider because they have to worry not only about their economic status or the color of their skin but they have to also consider the fact they fall into an additional category of being a first-generation student (Cushman, 2007). Many of these students fall into multiple

dimensions of identity such as, race, socio-economic status, and being first-generation are all forms of identity for one individual. Renn and Reason (2013) looked at the work of Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007) and how they established a model for multiple dimensions of identity. It was found there are different influences in someone's life, which can cause certain identities they have to become more relevant and important than others (Renn & Reason, 2013; Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007). Because of this, they could only worry about their identity as a student of color and not even consider their first-generation status. Potentially, at another time in their life being a first-generation student will be the most important thing to them. Not all identities will be present at all times but there can be many in which the student identifies with that are the most important to them at certain times within their life (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007). If all of the identities of being a part of a racial minority, low SES, and being a first-generation student are involved, research found it can cause students to feel isolated from others and leave them feeling as if they don't belong. They feel they are alone and they are the only one who has these identities (Cushman, 2007; Jehangir, 2008).

Many first-generation students are coming from backgrounds where they are unsupported due to family and friends lack of knowledge about the higher education system, which presents a different set of barriers (Woosley & Shepler, 2011). Korsmo (2014), who advocated for parental involvement in the educational pursuits of their children, acknowledges there are households where schooling may not be a priority. For some first-generation students, it is due to a lack of parental figures within the household who place priorities, such as employment, as more important than assisting their child (Korsmo, 2014). Some students may be expected during or after high school to get a job

in order to help out within the household and take some of the pressures off of the parents (Korsmo, 2014). This takes the attention away from educational attainment and tends to deter students from accessing higher education, as this becomes their priority. When students are able to access higher education, depending upon where the student goes, could determine how much they are able to assist the family (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2014). This could directly impact how the family is able to function and could lead to further disengagement in the family's involvement with their child's education.

On the other hand, there are many households where the family is very supportive of higher education (Korsmo, 2014). Parents want what is best for their child. Receiving a degree will allow them some form of mobility in life, potentially past what the parents currently have (Engle, Bermeo, and O'Brien, 2006). The only issue though is the parents do not have the correct information to provide their child with when it comes to what higher education really is (Petty, 2014). As families find ways to get their children to colleges, they are already moving into a direction of better assisting the family. With the child going to college, the parents then have access to a new body of knowledge, as well as potential resources their child has gained from attending (Korsmo, 2014).

Another reason these students may struggle is their lack of preparation for college. When coming into the institution they are already disadvantaged due to a lack of academic preparedness (Stephens et al., 2012). Much of this has to do with these students not having the most adequate access to college prep programs, adequate amounts of faculty, or courses which may meet their needs for being prepared (Petty, 2014). This is why the first year a student comes on campus is the most crucial period to get them integrated into the institution and to offer support to keep them retained (Steiha, 2010).

**Achievement Guilt.** Covarrubias and Fryberg (2014) conducted a study to better understand how and if first-generation college students experience family achievement guilt, as well as survivor guilt, when attending a four-year institution. The research was done by conducting two different studies at the University of Arizona, which is a large urban public research institution, comparing first-generation students to who were considered continuing-generation. The first study had 121 participants and the second study had 183 participants. The makeup of the students was male and female, as well as other identifiers such as race and whether or not they were a first-generation student or a continuing-generation student. Covarrubais and Fryberg only used data that came from first-generation and continuing-generation students who identified as being Caucasian or Latino.

When looking at what achievement guilt is, it is based on the success the student has achieved, or perceived to achieve, by either getting the opportunity to better themselves with higher learning or higher forms of employment in which other members of the family are not able to access (Covarrubais & Fryberg, 2014). Their first study consisted of identifying whether first-generation students, as well as Latino students, experience more guilt than continuing students, as well as white students. They found first-generation students tend to feel guiltier about leaving the family than their counterparts (Covarrubais & Fryberg, 2014). The students also stated they felt it was their responsibility to provide for the family, either by working and giving the money they make back to the family or by educating them on the information they themselves were learning (Covarrubais & Fryberg, 2014; Jenkins et al., 2013).

The second study took a broader look at the guilt by looking at more students who identify as a minority, instead of just looking at the Latino population. The researchers also randomly assigned participants to be a part of the “help family” group, where they would think about a time of helping a family member before the research was conducted to see if their answers would change (Covarrubais & Fryberg, 2014 p 5). The results from this study reflected those from the first. The researchers still found higher feelings of guilt because of their success, or achievement, when it came to minority students and those whom identified as being first-generation. But, the researchers did find those who had the opportunity to reflect on a time they helped the family, claimed their feeling of guilt was lessened (Covarrubais & Fryberg, 2014).

Covarrubais and Fryberg (2014) state in their discussion how it is important for university personnel, to understand the guilt, which is felt by some, in order to be able to help these students. Most programs and offices, like TRIO, peer advisers, writing centers, which are in place on campuses to help these students transition do not take this into consideration but could help the students take it out of a positive light and make it something they would be able to use as an advantage (Covarrubais & Fryberg, 2014). As this is only one barrier the university is able to help aid in, there are many others, like described previously, the university is able to help students handle. Unfortunately, their barriers are what make them who they are.

According to Housel (2012), the students may have limited access to people to associate themselves with and little support thus they have to find ways to try and help themselves. The reason behind this is many of the students also have to try and handle the distractions of potential employment, extra-curricular activities, and internships which

may be difficult for them to balance with academics and other factors (Housel, 2012).

This is where the university steps in to help guide them in the direction of completing a degree (Sanacore & Palumbo, 2015). The university provides resources in various offices and departments to ensure all students are successful while attending the institution.

Students have to be able to have easy access to this as they probably don't have all of the information needed to help themselves. Although, the university is taking a look at the students' needs from a wide perspective, some students may need a more individualized experience to ensure they are successful. Sanacore and Palumbo (2015) discussed the importance of faculty and college personnel taking more time to offer a more individualized experience, whether that be monitoring how they are doing, setting up goals with them, or helping them find activities or organizations within a campus to become involved in. Through this involvement, it can create a positive relationship between the student and the individual and can help validate the students need for attending college.

### **Campus Environment**

When colleges were first established, they were not created for all (Strange & Banning, 2001). Originally being for the wealthy, time has shaped higher education into a very different entity today. Higher education institutions are now available to those who are able to attend, which is starting to include everyone. They are designed and created now for everyone to be able to use with easy accessibility. Universities are able to provide opportunities through various avenues to all of their students on campus (Strange & Banning, 2001). This could be done through various offices and living opportunities, like financial aid, student success centers, writing centers, counseling centers, residence

halls, and others. The university is also able to provide various programs, like TRiO or a summer bridge program, to help students with things like transitioning or their academics (Caberara, Miner, & Milem, 2011). Even through offering various involvement opportunities to allow students to flourish within their fields of interest can go so far, students need to use all aspects of the university (Martin, 2011). But in order for all of this to happen, there needs to be faculty and staff to assist in the operations of the university. All of these different outlets are important for a first-generation students' experience. In order for the student to become successful, they need to utilize these resources and allow for the information or skills gained from them help aid them in achieving their goals.

Strange and Banning (2001) discussed the types of environments taking place within a campus environment. They stated it is crucial to understand all components as they all impact how the campus is able to function. The four environments they discussed are the physical, aggregate, organizational, and constructed environment (Strange & Banning, 2001). These environments are what shape the students' experience at the institution.

**Physical Environment.** The physical environment plays an impact on the universities functioning. When talking about the physical environment, Strange and Banning (2001) said it is the buildings, the lawns, signs, quads, sidewalks, open spaces, and the layout of the campus which make up the environment. These various things are important to students when coming to a university either for a visit or even for attendance because the way the campus looks is one of the factors getting students interested in coming to the university (Strange & Banning, 2001). The way a university is set up also

affects the other environments. It could impact the types of conversations amongst individuals, the types of behaviors, and the types of learning occurring at the university (Strange & Banning, 2001). For example, are the students finding they should act more prestigious because of the look of the university is kept up or should they be rowdy because the university looks run down. Also, does the building or area look conducive to do work in or provide the feeling of academic success through warmth or welcome or does it provide a feeling of not wanting to be there, something sterile. Every student is going to have a different experience when it comes to the environment they are in. Each student is going to have different things they are looking for aesthetically. With first-generation students they may not know what to even look for as they select an institution.

The campus environment could be impactful for first-generation students. For example, a first-generation student may be looking for the financial aid office and they might have the idea it would be located in the main administration building. Instead, it is in the student services building. If there is no campus map or signage around campus to direct them to the correct direction, then they might have difficulty finding the office. Many times it takes the student asking where to go to figure out where something is on campus. First-generation students want to feel comfortable in the environment they are in since they are making the transition into a brand new culture. The more a university can assist in providing different services or offices to help guide those students along with making them easy to find and in easily accessible locations, the more the students will access the resources.

**Aggregate Environment.** This environment looks at the types of people and the characteristics they are able to bring to the environment. “These human characteristics



influence the degree to which people are attracted to, satisfied within, and retained by those environments” (Strange & Banning, 2001, p. 35). If students are able to find peers and faculty members who have characteristics similar to their own, they are more likely to be invested in the environment than those who find no investment in those around them (Strange & Banning, 2001). Much of this could be based on the personality types of the individuals at the institution. It can also look at the types of organizations present on campus, as well as the types of living conditions, like residence halls, allowing for various connections to be created (Strange & Banning, 2001). These types of connections are important for first-generation students because this is potentially the first time they are creating new connections with those individuals outside of their family, peers, and community at home (Petty, 2014). Without these needs being met, first-generation students begin to start feeling uncomfortable and feel like they do not fit in causing them to depart from the university (Petty, 2014). One way this can be combated is the relationship of having a mentor in their life.

***Mentors.*** For most first-generation students, navigating higher education institutions is very difficult as it is something they are not typically used to doing (Housel, 2012). Trying to figure this out on their own can be a difficult and trying time for these students. Much of research shows when first-generation students are able to reach out to someone, in this case, a mentor, and have them help guide them through their process of gaining skills and knowledge will be more likely to be retained as well be more successful while attending college (Wang, 2012; Engle, Bermeo, & O’Brien, 2006; Davis, 2010; Hand & Payne, 2008). Through the close relationships created between the student and the other individual, the mentor is able to provide advice to the student,

encourage the student to be successful, be someone to push them to better themselves, and provide various messages to the student (Wang, 2012).

Wang (2012) conducted a study with a purposive sample of 30 participants who all identified as being a first-generation student. The purpose of her study was to talk with first-generation students about the meaningful messages they received from the mentors they had on campus. Some of the themes Wang was looking for consisted of discussing majors, finding appropriate resources on campus, what the value of a degree was, and how they were able to provide motivation (Wang, 2012). Through the messages provided, one common theme was the mentor they had sat down and helped them decide on a plan of action for the various things in their life. Many talked about creating academic plans with their mentors, whether for classes or for their majors (Wang, 2012). The students also said their mentors pushed them to think beyond college and themselves and think about what they wanted to do after being in college to give them something to work toward as a goal (Wang, 2012). Wang (2012) found there was a great impact on first-generation students from what their mentors had discussed with them and how the information was provided to the students they found to be the most beneficial. Although Wang didn't look at the level of persistence of the students as a result of what the mentors told the students, it can be seen through their words mentors had a large impact on what first-generation students do.

College is a very important time for first-generation students because it is when they start to become their own person. Some of those individuals are specifically designed to serve as mentors, including positions like orientation staff, resident assistants, and tutors, just to name a few. These people can help them learn how to integrate with

others and find affective ways to communicate. College campuses can also provide ways for them to continue to build skills to be able to use later on in their future. First-generation students just have to take the time and opportunities provided to them in order for campus to be able to help aid them as that is the only way they will truly be able to be successful.

**Organizational Environment.** The organizational environment is established to set goals. The goals are set typically are those set by the institution as a whole (Strange & Banning, 2001). “For example, the goal of a university is to educate students, construct and disseminate knowledge, and to serve the community” (Strange & Banning, 2001, p. 59). This does not only take the university itself but it takes the faculty and personnel, student organizations, residence halls, academic curriculums, campus services, and others in order for these main goals to be fulfilled (Strange & Banning, 2001). Within these areas, they have to establish their own goals to accomplish to ensure they are producing something for the greater good, in this case the university. Many organizations have their own set of constitutions, missions, and standards they hold themselves to. How these offices and the institution set their goals should include considerations for all student populations they work with, including first-generation students. For first-generation students, it is important to get involved and become fully involved in the organization and one of the ways first-generation students can do this is by getting involved.

**Campus Involvement.** Students look at the possibilities available for them to succeed when it comes to the goals they have set for themselves (Martin, 2011). One of those goals could be getting involved in different aspects on campus, whether through student organizations, community service, or even within a floor community, which allows for students to develop relationships as well as grow personally (Jehangir, 2008).

For many, getting involved allows students to find others who are similar to them and have shared interests. It allows for them to find their niche within the institution, as well as a support system for them, and allow for their own voice to be heard while attending the institution (Martin, 2011; Fisher, 2007). It also helps the individual build skills which could help them become more successful in their endeavors. Many studies have found the more involved a student is the higher satisfaction the student has with an institution and the more likely they are to complete their degree (Woosely & Shepler, 2011; Fisher, 2007; Martin, 2011).

Trying to integrate into a new lifestyle and culture can be very difficult for first-generation students (Housel, 2012). This is because they are encountering a campus environment which has a new set of norms which are completely different from what they are accustomed to (Olson, 2014). This may be overwhelming for these students as they have limited amount of knowledge prior to entering the institution as to what was possible for them within the network of a higher education institution (Cushman, 2007). These students are already coming into an institution at a disadvantage because they are not at the same level of social skills as their peers, as well as other barriers (Woosely & Shepler, 2011). First-generation students are looking for ways to ensure they don't come off as being the outcast to others and instead would rather fit in (Cushman, 2007). Campus involvement for first-generation students is vital because it allows them to become social beings and helps with integration and normalization (Jehangir, 2008; Martin, 2011). The type of environment impacts first-generation students' feelings about being able to integrate with others. For example, if they are able to obtain support from those groups or environments or if they are able to achieve success with their academics

due to the efforts put forth in the group (Woosely & Shepler, 2011). For some of these students, being a part of a social group may not be attainable as they might have to find employment in order to be able to stay at the institution. Students who were employed and taking classes were found to have less satisfaction within their campus life and integration with others (Martin, 2011). Jehangir (2008) stated for those students who were able to become involved, specifically first-generation, they were able to find an identity within the institution and were more likely to be retained at the institution to complete a degree and also allowed them to have more of a voice within their social life and academics.

**Constructed Environment.** Strange and Banning (2001) say this is the environment the individual personally establishes, or seeing it through their own eyes. Based on the other types of environments, as well as personal experiences, individuals have different perceptions when it comes to institutions. Some may have a strong feeling toward how the campus looks, whereas someone else may not necessarily care about it but instead be more interested in the relationships they are able to create at the institution (Strange & Banning, 2001). First-generation students may see the campus very differently than a continuing generation student. For example, a continuing generation student could have been raised going back to their parents' alma maters, whereas first-generation students may not have stepped on a campus previously. This could create a feeling of being in a foreign state. For first-generation students, a well-constructed environment, including the physical, aggregate, organizational, is vital because it would help them stay engaged, stay integrated, and retained in order to continue on to graduation (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005).

## **Theoretical Framework**

When coming into an institution, a student has to shape who they want to be and how they want to be perceived by society (Jehangir, 2008). This is going to look very different for each student as many students have different areas of interest, academic performance, or ideas of what they want to do after receiving their degree. For many students, this is their first opportunity to really explore who they are away from their family, which holds true for first-generation students. Most first-generation students have set expectations as to who they need to become when they attend higher education based on their family's views and beliefs (Olson, 2014). First-generation families want their children to be successful in order to move further past their own accomplishments to have a better life experience (Olson, 2014; Covarrubais & Fryberg, 2014). In order for this success to happen though, the student truly has to find who they are and not let the family dictate the students' life. Chickering and Reisser's Theory of Identity Development (1993) discusses how students are able to move through seven vectors in order to establish who they are as an individual.

**Chickering and Reisser's Theory of Identity Development.** Chickering and Riesser's (1993) theory of identity development addresses how one develops during their late teens and into their early twenties. They identified when students were finding themselves they would take various paths in order to get to their sense of self and understanding of who they are as a person. Chickering and Riesser viewed this not like a stage system, because it would be hard to place every student within every stage, but more as a vector system. With this system, the student was able to move in and out of the vectors, could be in different vectors at the same time, or completely avoid some of the

vectors entirely depending on what their journey looked like (Chickering & Riesser, 1993). Therefore, they established a seven vector model in order to better understand how students develop themselves.

According to Chickering and Reisser (1993) in the first vector, developing competence, the individual is able to gain three types of competence: physical, manual, and interpersonal. From these different types of competence, the individual is starting to develop goals and skills that are going to help them to be able to comprehend, analyze, and synthesize the things happening within their lives (Chickering & Riesser, 1993). As the student is developing, they will gain a better understanding of their mind, and abilities, as well as the interactions they have with others. When it comes to first-generation students, they are starting to gain this competence just by asking questions or approaching other individuals allowing for them to get a better understanding of where exactly they are and what exactly they are able to do while at the university. They are able to start developing skills which will help them throughout their time at the institution.

The second vector is managing emotions (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). In this stage, the student is able to acknowledge they will have different feelings and not to suppress or eliminate the feelings but have an awareness of them, especially how they react in different situations. Many first-generation students will experience many feelings when coming into a new environment (Steiha, 2010; Callanta & Ortiz, 2009; Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2014; Housel, 2012). For example, first-generation students could feel excitement about getting the opportunity to be on a campus or possibly being away from home for the first time. This could also look like anger or frustration because they may

not know how to navigate the campus or know where to go to if they are not achieving their academic standards. Some other examples of emotions they could feel are joy, sadness, homesickness, and others. Trying to gain a better understanding of their own emotions could help them put them toward more productive things.

Moving through autonomy toward interdependence is the third vector (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Within this vector, the student is starting to gain their own independence and starting to find their direction by setting goals for themselves and also developing skills to help aid them in becoming independent (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). The individual is also starting to realize they do not have to rely on others to make their decisions for them or to tell them what to do. They will begin to notice relationships they previously have had start to change because many of those relationships were ones where they were looking for reassurance or approval from those around them (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Some first-generation students may come in with a scripted plan for their college career, including major, classes to take, and plans for after college. Other first-generation students may come in to college with no plan, no support, and no direction. Through their experiences in college both students may rewrite their script and change their plans, which are all part of their developing autonomy and beginning to make their own plans. There are many cases where the student has to figure out what is needed to be successful and try to further themselves for some mobility in the future (Callanta & Ortiz, 2009). Finding a good balance between the two might be what is best for the student as it could allow for the opinions of others to be considered but the student still making the decision on their own.



Developing mature interpersonal relationships is the next vector in the theory of identity development. In this vector, two different things happen. First, the individual develops a tolerance and also an appreciation for differences (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). This is considered to be looking not only at diversity but also having an awareness, openness, curiosity, about others around the topic of diversity. The second thing happening is the individual develops a capacity for intimacy. This means the individual would have a greater capacity for developing close relationships with others, as well as ensures those relationships are healthy and worthwhile. (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). With many first-generation students, maintaining healthy relationships with family members at home who have not experienced college may be difficult while at the same time they are establishing new relationships with those at the college. This may put the student in an interesting position relating to those going through the same experiences and those who do not understand what they are experiencing. (Wang, 2012). These types of relationships could be established through potential floor or roommates, campus organizations, reaching out to faculty or staff, or through other avenues. These individuals will be able to be the students' support system as well as be the person to accept them for their flaws and be the people they will confide in (Chickering & Riesser, 1993).

Up until this point, each vector has had its own purpose in developing an individual. The next vector, establishing identity, relies on the development of the individual in all of the previous vectors (Chickering & Riesser, 1993). Within this vector, "the understanding of the individuals' comfort with body and appearance, comfort with their gender and sexual orientation, sense of self in regards to social, historical, and

cultural context, clarification of self-concept through roles and life-style, sense of self in response to feedback from others, self-acceptance and self-esteem, and personal stability and integration” are all involved in order for someone to establish who they are going to be (Chickering & Riesser, 1993, p. 181). There may be some aspects which are more important for the individual to concentrate on but as a whole, they shape a person. One thing with identity though is that it is changing. There may be different identities over the course of time an individual can have due to different life experiences. There is the possibility of multiple identities happening at the same time as well. This is one of the more important vectors for first-generation students as they try to establish them in order to fit in (Jehangir, 2008).

Identity for first-generation students can be very shaky as they are coming into a new environment and establishing who they are again but within a different culture (Housel, 2012). This could be one of the largest vectors for a first-generation student because when entering an institution, they could either accept or reject the first-generation status and whether or not they want to have that identity (Stephens et al., 2012). It also is important for them because it helps as they become the individual they want for the future (Olson, 2014). One way a first-generation student could create their identity is by getting involved. This could be something simple for them as they are just using interests they already have and finding likeminded people. When first-generation students come to college, they create a new identity for themselves. But when they go back home, they have the struggle of trying to maintain their new identity or revert back to the previous one they had (Cushman, 2007). This issue is one where they have to

determine who exactly it is they need to be at the different times. Overall, it is vital for them to create an identity as this will help shape their future.

The vector following establishing identity is developing purpose (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). In this vector, the student or individual is in the process of developing goals, making plans, and continuing to persist no matter what the situation or obstacles are standing in their way. They do this by ensuring they are intentional in everything they are doing (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). In order for them to do this, there are a few elements which are needed. Those elements are vocational plans and aspirations, personal interests, and interpersonal and family commitments (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 212). For many first-generation students, the goal of graduation is their main goal, which establishes the purpose of why they are at a higher education institution (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Callanta & Ortiz, 2009; Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2014; Jamelske, 2009). Obviously there could be greater goals, like getting out of the lower class or finding a well-paying job to help support the family, but for all of those to happen, the student has to come up with a purpose for everything they are doing. In order for a student to graduate, they are going to have to establish relationships as well as set certain goals along the way in order to ensure they achieve their end goal. With everything they do, there will have to be some form of purpose for what they do. A great example would be deciding on a major. In a first-generation students' life this could be a huge step as they may not have previously considered what is they wanted to do when getting to college. This is a way of setting a goal and establishing a purpose for being at the university which will directly impact their future.

The final vector of Chickering and Reisser's (1993) theory of identity development is developing integrity. In order for the student to fall into this vector, they have to participate in three overlapping stages. The stages are humanizing values, personalizing values, and developing congruence (Chickering & Riesser, 1993). Humanizing values looks at rules and how they are taken from a more literal view to more of a relative view, this could be looking at the assumptions students have coming in like what is right and wrong but then changing those assumptions over time. Meaning as students continue to develop, they start to understand them in more of a different light (Chickering & Riesser, 1993). Much of what they learn comes from when they were younger as they are influenced by the people and experiences surrounding them during that time (Chickering & Riesser, 1993). When it comes to personalizing their values, individuals set guidelines for what they are comfortable with and over time will be standard for themselves (Chickering & Riesser, 1993). Finally, the development of congruence only can be achieved if their behavior is parallel with the standards they have (Chickering & Riesser, 1993).

While this vector takes a lot of time to accomplish, it is one which might be the most difficult for first-generation students to achieve. This vector may not necessarily be seen within the first two years of a first-generation student's college experience but rather more likely on the latter end after they have had time to start becoming an individual and establish who they are and are ready to go out into the professional world.

Chickering and Riesser's (1993) theory of identity development really can help in understanding how college students develop through their time at the institution, and it especially helps understand what first-generation students coming into higher education

may go through during their undergraduate years. It also can help determine how to ensure these students are successful while attending. Not all vectors are going to be seen in every first-generation student as every students' experiences are unique (Davis, 2010). Through their experiences and development first-generation students have the opportunity to develop in to their own person.

**Summary**

First-generation students are coming into higher education institutions in a different way when compared to other students. They have to overcome various barriers that are specific to them and find outlets or information and support in order to achieve the goal of attaining a degree. In Chapter III, the methods of how the research will be conducted will be addressed.

## CHAPTER III

### **Methodology**

The primary purpose of this study was to better understand how first-generation students utilize the services on campus in order to become successful. This study focused on how the students learned about and utilized the various resources the campus has to offer. The study looked at the challenges these students faced in order to utilize the services provided on campus. The study also sought to identify what the student describes as their success at the institution.

### **Design of Study**

In order to gain a better understanding of how first-generation students experience college, a basic interpretive qualitative study was used by conducting direct interviews with students at a midsized, Midwestern public institution. A basic interpretive qualitative study allowed for the researcher to gain the essence of the individual's different experiences and also allowed for universal themes or meanings to emerge from their shared experiences (Merriam, 1998). The study was conducted with five second-year students who identify as first-generation college students. The researcher conducted a semi-structured interview with each of the participants, which allowed for the researcher to ask questions and allowed for the participants to provide additional information (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2011). The interviews were then transcribed and coded in order to identify themes.

### **Participants**

The researcher conducted five individual interviews with traditional-aged, sophomore students who identified as first-generation college students. For the purpose

of this study, the definition of a first-generation student was those who had neither parent having received a bachelor's degree or higher. The researcher gained access to the participants by contacting the director of the Student Success Center, the director of a special admissions program, and professional staff members who work in the department of Housing and Dining Services. From those individuals contacted, there were lists of students who qualified for participation. There was a total of 25 student names provided to the researcher. The students were sent an email invitation (Appendix A) to participate in the study. Only five of the students responded with interest in participating. Once interest from the participants was established, a time was discussed in order to conduct the interview.

The students selected consisted of two Caucasian males and three Caucasian females, and this was done intentionally to isolate first-generation status, meaning they did not have any additional challenging experiences when it comes to their identity of race or ethnicity. The participants are as follows:

**Viola.** Viola is a sophomore student pursuing a bachelor's degree in English. She is involved on campus with Epsilon Sigma Alpha service sorority, as well as serving as a Resident Assistant (RA) for University Housing and Dining Services.

**Emma.** Emma is a sophomore student who is undecided in the major she wants to pursue. She is involved in a special admissions program, which she stated does not allow for her to get involved until she has successfully met the requirements of the program.

**Oliver.** Oliver is a sophomore student who is pursuing a bachelor's degree in software engineering. He is involved in a special admissions program, which he stated

does not allow for him to get involved until he successfully meets the requirements of the program.

**Felicity.** Felicity is a sophomore student, by credits, who is pursuing a bachelor's degree in communication disorders. Felicity had previously attended a community college for two years prior to coming to her current institution, where she had received only enough credits to come into the current institution as a sophomore. She is involved in the campus community through the involvement in her sorority, Alpha Gamma Delta.

**Barry.** Barry is a sophomore student who is pursuing a bachelor's degree in pre-nursing. He is involved on campus through intramural sports, as well as through the Catholic student center just off campus.

### **Site**

The study took place at a mid-sized Midwestern public institution. The school has approximately 9,000 students with 49 different undergraduate majors and 20 different graduate programs. Institutional data showed there were 1,085 students who came into the institution in the Fall of 2015. Out of the 1,085 freshman students, 461 (42.5%), identified as being first-generation students. The racial/ethnic makeup of the class was approximately 56.9% White or Caucasian, 26.8% Black or African American, 8.7% Hispanic, and 9.4% Asian, Other, or Unreported. The first time freshman class included 399 males (37.5%), and 664 females (62.5%).

The interviews took place within two different locations, the classroom of a residence hall and a meeting room within an academic building on campus. This allowed for a common meeting place for the researcher and the participants. The classroom is located in the lower level of the residence hall, which allowed for a quieter environment



for the interview to take place. The meeting room was located on the second floor of an academic building. Both the classroom and meeting room doors were shut in order to keep the interviews private, as well as keep the identity of the participants confidential.

A couple of the participants are a part of a special admissions program provided by the university. The program is designed to help those who fall below the regular admissions requirements regarding grade point average and ACT scores. The program is provided to help students get acclimated to the institution. The program is designed to assist students with skill development like writing or studying, needed to be successful. Students in this program have weekly study hall hours and advising appointments they have to attend, which help ensure they are on the right path to success. The program also encourages students to get involved on campus. The largest population who are part of this are first-generation students and minority students.

### **Instrument**

For this study, the researcher utilized two main instruments in order to conduct the research. One of the main instruments that was utilized was the researcher. The researcher has the knowledge about the students themselves and has done research in order to better understand the type of student they are looking at. An email was sent out inviting sophomore, first-generation students to participate in the study (Appendix A). The email allowed the selected students to volunteer to participate and allowed for the researcher to start communication with the participant. Through communication, a time was established that worked best for both the researcher and participant to meet.

The second instrument that was utilized was a semi-structured interviewing process. In order for the interview to be conducted, the researcher had the participants

sign a consent form (Appendix C) to be able to participate in the study. Also, during this process, an interview protocol (Appendix B) was utilized within the interview. The interview protocol acted as a guide to help cover the topic areas the researcher wanted to address (Brickmann & Kvale, 2015). It consisted of questions to help guide the conversation, but allowed for other questions to be addressed depending upon the discussion which took place.

### **Data Collection**

Data for the study was collected through semi-structured one-on-one interviews. The interviews took place during the second semester of the participants' second year. The use of open ended questions allowed for further questions to develop based on the interview discussion providing the participant with opportunities to share openly with the researcher (Fraenkle, Wallen, & Hyun, 2011). Before the interviews, the participants signed an informed consent form. Participants also were notified that their names would be replaced with a pseudonym in the study in order to maintain their confidentiality. The interviews took place in a residence hall classroom on campus and a meeting room in an academic building. This allowed for a comfortable and an easily accessible place for the researcher and the participant to meet. The interviews for each participant lasted about a half an hour each and were voice recorded to be able to review the interview in order to collect data. After the interview had been conducted, then the conversation was transcribed.

### **Treatment of Data**

The researcher audio recorded each interview and transcriptions of the interviews were completed. Field notes were taken throughout this process as a way of reflecting on

the entire experience. Participants audio recorded interviews along with digital copies of the transcriptions from the interviews were downloaded and kept on a password protected hard drive. The hard copies of the transcriptions and the field notes were placed in a file folder. Both the hard drive and the file folder were placed within a locked filing cabinet within the researcher's office that only the researcher has access to. After a three-year time period, the hard drive will be cleared and the files will be shredded.

### **Data Analysis**

The audio recordings from the interviews were transcribed by the researcher only. The interviews were transcribed following the interview. Field notes, as well as the interviews themselves aided in the transcription process. When transcribing, the various participants' responses were recorded to gain a better understanding about the participants and their stories, as well as their experiences (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2011). Finding the themes, or patterns, from the participants' responses is known as coding (Saladana, 2013). This was done by looking at words, phrases, or paragraphs the participants said and placing an overall meaning with it based on what was found from all the interviews (Saladana, 2013). Coding allowed for the researcher to put the findings from the transcriptions into categories (Saladana, 2013). Once this was done, they were able to help identify findings in relation to the research questions. From coding the interviews, it was be understood how these students achieved success from the various resources on campus.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, the participants, the participant selection process, interview locations, instruments which were used, data collection process, data treatment process,

and data analysis process were reviewed for the phenomenological qualitative research method that was used. The data collected from the interviews conducted with the first-generation students was used in the following chapter. Chapter IV will present the findings of the data collected from the interviews.

## CHAPTER IV

### **Results and Analysis**

The primary purpose of this study was to analyze and gain an understanding of the experiences first-generation, second year college students have gone through when it comes to the successes and challenges they have had in college and how on campus resources have been able to support and aid them. Chapter IV provides the analysis of five face-to-face qualitative interviews done with first-generation, second year college student participants. The results are themes that emerged from the interviews. Although each participant had a very different story to tell about their experience, there were similarities allowing for some main themes to come out of their stories. The researcher then analyzed results to identify various themes to answer the questions that guided the study. This section will be broken down by each research question and what themes came out within those questions.

#### **Identification and Awareness of Resources and Support on Campus**

Each of the participants had various ways of finding out what resources were available to them. The participants discussed where they learned about these resources that were available and then how they could utilize them. Participants identified that they found out about the resources available to them through peer influence, campus programs, and self-discovery.

**Peer Influences.** Each of the participants talked about how someone or a group of individuals encouraged them to seek out different forms of assistance on campus. The individuals the participants identified were family members, friends, Resident Assistants (RA), and faculty members who helped them determine places to go or even people to

talk to. Barry had cousins who had previously attended the institution who were able to help him navigate getting settled into the college setting. Barry stated:

Considering I didn't have any friends that were coming here, they told me about the success center and maybe like the, this may not be related, but the dining halls, then the health center, and then everything in the union, when it comes to housing services and all of that. They also told me about tutors and such because I was really worried about the transition from high school teachers to college professors. I really didn't know how much more difficult it would be but it really wasn't that bad.

Barry not only had the conversation about these resources with his cousins but others as well. He identified that he was a strong writer but he felt he would need some assistance with his writing. Barry stated this about what his cousins and even his faculty had to say about the writing center on campus:

I did hear from my cousins before that it was a great place to go to if you had writers block or if you were struggling with some aspect of the paper. But both of my comp teachers would be like, if you are having trouble and we can't help you, then just go to the writing center, they will kind of work your way there.

Emma identified faculty as people who led her to know what the writing center was. She stated:

Well I knew going to see my teachers would help because they are the ones giving me the grades. It would be best to see them and get their actual opinion rather than going to the writing center and get it from them.

Even though she did identify it as a resource she was encouraged to use, she still chose not to use it because she identified her professors as more knowledgeable.

Viola discussed how using her peers and even her RA to find out about the different people and places to go to on campus was helpful for her. Oliver also identified friends as being a group of people he went to because they were all people who were “like minded” and needed the same forms of help that he needed. Viola and Oliver were the only participants who discussed referring others to various resources. Viola said she learned about and referred other students to resources because she was an RA. Oliver talked about how he would refer a friend to the writing center because he saw that individual struggling, but yet he stated he had never been to the writing center himself, even though he claimed he struggled with his writing.

**Campus Programs.** Each of the participants had to go through orientation, which allowed them to hear about different resources available on campus. Viola talked about how through orientation, and the admissions process, she learned about health services and the writing center on campus as well as other resources she might need to use like the emergency poles placed throughout various points on campus. Barry discussed how during his process going through orientation, he remembers them talking about resources but no distinct one he could remember. Barry also stated:

Other than to use the resources on campus and to not be scared to go up to my professors to ask questions, I mean you are supposed to be able to get that one on one time that everyone wants but doesn't always happen.

Barry discussed the impact the faculty had in helping him. Oliver also discussed going through orientation but the conversation he had with the people who were assisting him was very different than the others. Oliver stated:

They talked about, like how you are going to meet so many people and you are going to do great things here and you are going to do so many not so great things...But it showed me how to do it safely and I guess the best way I was oriented here was like meeting different people. Because the staff showed us...well you know this will help you get assimilated socially, which was a definite help to me to get more comfortable in my campus environment.

The three participants had very different views of their orientation experience and therefore, they were able to provide differing perspectives on the orientation process.

Felicity identified herself as being a transfer student. Her form of orientation actually started with the TRiO program at the community college she attended. Felicity described her experience, stating, "They would take us on campus tours of different campuses so you could go there, which was really helpful so my parents wouldn't have to take me to any schools or anything."

**Self-Discovery.** When learning about the resources on campus, two of the participants, Barry and Felicity, identified times where they had to find those resources on their own. In both cases, they were either provided information about them prior to seeking them out or they had to find them on their own. The cause of them seeking it out was due to needing the resource at a certain point in their experience. Barry talked about how even though his cousins did talk to him about the writing center, he was the one who had to seek it out initially. The information they provided to him was limited and he



found a need for the use of the center. He said, “I just took the initiative to go and find someone to go and help me with it and then it was the writing center and peers who helped me.” Felicity utilized advertising to help her find the resources she needed.

Felicity said:

When I got here and knew I was having a hard time adjusting, I probably needed to see someone and just talk to them and so it was very easy on the universities website to find like counseling services and to get in with them and then talk with someone. Then, with the resume thing, you get emails all of the time telling you to go to this. So, it encourages you to go to all of the different things and get your resume done.

Felicity was able to find the resources she needed with some convenience because of advertising she saw on campus and on the institution’s website. From her first experience with finding the counseling center, she was able to later find career services.

### **Types of Support Utilized On Campus**

The five participants were asked a variety of questions about different places on campus they go to for help or even the different people they might use as a resource or a mentor. The participants each found a person or place that allowed them to feel comfortable with getting the assistance and guidance. Some of the participants identified needing these support systems because of things going on in their personal lives, while others were trying to find those types of support to help improve their academic work. When it came to the participants identifying the types of support they utilized, the themes of faculty, campus offices and their programs, as well as peers, seemed to be the strongest forms of support the participants identified.

**Faculty.** Faculty played a role in many of the participants' experiences. Students identified the faculty helping them both personally and academically. Some have even been mentored by their faculty members. Viola talked about a project of writing a faux grant proposal she had to do for an English course. She shared how she was struggling with it because she had a topic but did not know where to go with it. She stated, "I talked through it with my professor because I wasn't really sure what direction to go in." Viola went on to say:

At first I was kind of broad because I didn't know what to do but he helped me narrow it down. I wouldn't say he told me what to do, he kind of narrowed my focus in and he was like, "I think this is what you're trying to do with this, I think you should go in this direction and see where that takes you."

Viola stated that assistance was helpful in her completing that course assignment. From that experience, Viola learned to "go and talk to professors about papers and stuff, which helped a lot. I knew I needed to keep doing that." Emma had a similar experience to Viola's. Emma said, "I saw some of my English teachers for my papers and stuff and they showed me what I could do better." That was not the only take away Emma got from those interactions. She further stated, "They actually get to know you and care about your grades and have an understanding of what you need in order to succeed, rather than not even knowing who you are." Barry also found interacting with his instructors was helpful and allowed for them to get to know him. He shared, "Some of my teachers may not have realized it but they really did help me." By getting their help, he stated:

You really get that one on one time to basically ask the dumb questions to get to the right answer. I mean, you are unsure about some of the questions that may

seem obvious to you, but once you get the professor's point of view, you can start narrowing down how to get to that correct answer. The professors really helped me be able to look at the right information and not the information as a whole because when you are reading things, there are words that don't even matter. You just need to look for the main things. That is really what they helped me with my chemistry teacher who helped me with some of the math. I know my algebra, but chemistry is a different type of math and they really helped me with that.

By getting the faculties support, these participants identified the support provided to do well academically.

**Campus Offices and Programs.** Each of the participants was asked about the different resources they utilize and found to be helpful on campus. Both Viola and Felicity talked about using the counseling center and health services when dealing with transitions to the new college atmosphere. Felicity talked more in depth about her experience going to counseling services, as well as using career services. She stated:

When I first got here, I really used the counseling services to help me adjust to the new transition. Now that I have moved further on in my career, I am utilizing others, like career services with resumes and interviewing tips and things like that. It just really has been through the different transitions here, so far, I relied on the different resources.

Felicity talked about some of the resources she has been able to use. She addressed the time at her previous institution and how she used the transfer office in order to get to the current institution. Felicity said, "The transfer person was very hands on with me. They

helped me fill out my application and worked with me to make sure all of my credits would transfer.”

Barry talked about how he has utilized different offices on campus, like the chemistry office, biological sciences office, and even the student success center. Oliver also talked about using the student success center on campus. He said, “The student success center definitely played a major role when I first came here, because it definitely saved me in essentially all of my classes.” Oliver then discussed how he is a part of a special admissions program. Through that program, he was able to find support with the tutors they provided, as well as his advisor for the program. Emma also identified as being a participant in this program. She said it was nice to have the tutors because “they helped me during study hours. I know I can get my homework done instead of just staying at home and not doing my homework.”

**Peers.** Another support system the participants identified were their peers. They not only helped guide them to the resources on campus but also were resources for them on campus. Viola discussed how her friends and her RA were there for her when she was dealing with a difficult time in the transition from being at home to being at school. Felicity also identified the same support, just from her friends and sorority sisters, when it came to the same transition. Oliver on the other hand found support from his friends when it came to academics. He found that “getting together with a few friends I would have in class and we would talk about it, what is this and how can we understand it. We came up with a way we can understand it.” Oliver was able to find a way for each of them to help support one another. He later mentioned, “When you surround yourself with

the right people, and you all have a common goal, through cooperation, you can learn to achieve that goal.”

### **Ways First-Generation Students Are Challenged in College**

All of the participants were able to identify a variety of challenges they have faced thus far. Many of them felt at times it would be difficult to overcome those challenges but all of them came out stating they had learned something from their experiences. There were cases of homesickness, not knowing how to talk with parents, academic struggles, and hardships with transitions. The two themes which were prevalent in all of the participants' experiences were personal and academic challenge.

**Personal Challenges.** When describing the types of things they were going through, the participants had a wide variety of life experiences that had challenged them and helped shape them as people. Two of the participants, Viola and Felicity, both identified homesickness as one of the things they had to work through. Viola said “being away from home and not being with my mom” was difficult when first coming to the institution. This is when she utilized her friends and Resident Assistant to help her get through it by trying to get her mind off of it. She said, “They would be like, ‘you’re fine.’ Then we would do something fun.” Where Viola utilized friends to turn to, Felicity decided to use the counseling center. Felicity said, “Just being away from home there are a lot of times where it’s like three weeks here and you are just super homesick.”

Felicity not only dealt with homesickness, but she also had to work with how to talk with her parents about higher education. She stated:

My family was supportive. They never went to college so they never really understand anything. They supported me going to school and picking the school,

but they really didn't know how to help me to do it. They really didn't know I should be scheduling campus tours and how I should be applying and things like that. So, I was very on my own there.

Even after getting into the institution, Felicity found it hard to talk about the things she wanted to tell them, like how she wanted to get involved or how she was doing academically, because they didn't understand and they really didn't know how to be that support system for her. That is why she was very thankful for her involvement with the TRiO program.

Oliver had to deal with a different situation coming into the institution. He had lost a close friend to him when starting his freshman year. Because of this, he saw some changes within himself. Oliver said:

It was just a couple of months of me in a funk. I didn't want to go to class. I didn't want to hang out. So, it was mentally me just having to tell myself, look he is gone, you are going to have to move on.

Oliver said he tried to use some of the services on campus but found they were not helping him. He turned to his roommate to try and work through this challenge. The other challenge Oliver faced was getting acclimated to life in a residence hall. He felt he was not well enough prepared in order to be successful in this environment. He said:

I would have liked to know more about what dorm living would have been like because they gave us a little mockup of what a dorm room would have looked like and was a bad example of "this is what we give you." When I got into the dorm, my roommate's already moved in and I am sitting there like, "Wow I did not

expect this.” It was definitely a shock and it would help if they could elaborate more on how to integrate yourself into a new environment.

He did talk later about how he was able to integrate himself in the community he resided in but it was not in the most positive way. Oliver talked about going out and partying with the individuals within his community, causing his grades to slip.

**Academic Challenge.** Academics played a large role in each of the participants’ experiences. Many of them talked about how there were moments where their academic lives were the largest challenges they had to go through. Emma talked about how the course load from high school to college was very different. She stated, “In high school, I was okay. I thought college was going to be similar but it wasn’t. It was very different.” Emma spoke about not doing so well in biology because of the difference in academic rigor. Oliver had a similar experience, but his was in regard to his writing. He said:

I came here not knowing how to write papers or study. When I wrote a paper in high school, what gave me a C there, gave me a definite F here. I have to learn how to write a paper correctly. I mean it took a while, almost a semester for me to get it, but I eventually understood it and got it down.

Oliver also struggled with studying as he felt it was a waste of time and was something he could just get by without doing and still pass.

When speaking about her transfer from community college to a four-year institution, Felicity discussed, how the course work and load changed. She said:

The transition from community college classes to classes here, they are very different. When I was at community college, I honestly did not like any of my professors. The material that I learned there was quality; I just didn’t feel like it

was a great education. Then coming here, I feel like it is a much better education, so obviously, it is a lot tougher. I am much more appreciative of it because I can tell I am getting such a better education here then at the community college.

Although Felicity saw the new academic setting as a challenge, she was still able to turn it to become an advantage of hers.

Barry talked about different challenges when it came to the situations he dealt with academically. One of the things he dealt with was his lack of time management. Barry said:

I really didn't realize how much time I would have, and I did a poor job of balancing homework with my extra-curricular. Since my freshman year, all I did was stay in my room and watch TV. I would really procrastinate and push everything off to the side. Then when the time came to do it, like my homework, I would underestimate how much it was and then be up until like two o'clock in the morning. I would be tired in the morning from all of my classes. But, definitely time management and probably study habits too. I had to adapt new study habits just depending upon the teachers. Just going from teacher to teacher and they all would have different ways of teaching you.

As a result of his time management issues and his procrastination, Barry was having issues when it came to tests in his anatomy and physiology course, as well as his chemistry course. He even said his writing for the various courses suffered because of the amount of time and effort he was able to put forth because of his procrastination.



### **First-Generation Students' Successes in College**

Throughout the participants' time at the institution, they all expressed feeling successful. They all have found different ways to obtain success. For some, it might have been something that came easily; but for others, it was something they had to work hard to achieve. When the participants talked about success and what it looked like to them, the majority stated success came from things they have done academically. Therefore, the overarching theme found within this question is academic success.

**Academic Success.** For the participants, each of them described an academic experience in which they found success. Viola talked about how she felt successful when she was able to learn about writing a grant proposal for a class project. She said, "I was very proud of my grant proposal" because she was able to go through the whole process of writing it. She talked about how it allowed her to "learn I can write professionally and you can use writing to do actual serious things and it could be another career option." This "gave her something to feel good about," which is how she personally defined success.

Emma's success was tied to a class as a whole. Emma found her greatest success to be passing her biology class. She saw this as a success because it was the one class she had been struggling in, and in the end she was able to deal with the challenge. She saw her success as "when you think you can't do something but then you prove yourself wrong." Oliver had a similar experience to Emma's. Oliver said:

My greatest success was probably passing my first math class. Because, I always was a terrible math student and when I got that B, I'm like, "Oh my god, this is

the best thing that ever happened.” I called my mom and said “Hey mom, you’re never going to guess what happened.”

Oliver said he was able to set a goal for himself and he was able to achieve it. This aligned with how he defined what success meant to him.

Felicity was able to find her success by gaining her independence. She talked about the challenges of being a first-generation student and having to figure out things for herself:

With being a first-generation student, I didn’t have my parents to help me and I didn’t have any other people, like aunts or uncles, to help because none of them did the college life. There is no one to really relate to because I can’t call home. There were times where I would be doing bad in a class and I didn’t have my parents to push me to be like, “You need to get this grade point average and you need to do good.” That would have been really helpful because being pushed you do better. I would call home and it would be like, “I got a C in this class,” and they would say, “oh well.” Their opinion is you can do good and still be successful without college careers. To them, it doesn’t matter if I flunk out of school or anything.

Felicity said this was one of the things that pushed her to become independent and allow herself to do the things she wanted. She said:

It’s the being on your own away from your parents that teaches you a lot. But then, in the classroom, me being so much more here and taking on leadership positions that I never thought I would have the chance of becoming or ever doing. Thanks to this school, it’s made me want to get involved because of how much I

love this school. I guess it makes me want to be in leadership positions and do well in the classroom and have a good grade point average.

Barry also identified coursework as his success. He views success as “graduating college with a bachelor’s degree.” In order to achieve that success, he found his success by finally getting a 3.4 grade point average. He was proud of this because it was the highest he had gotten, as well as it was a way to show he had improved upon his procrastination because it caused his grade point average to be low previously.

### **Summary**

This chapter provided an analysis of the responses provided by the participants to help with the research questions guiding this study. The participants were able to identify, through reflection of their experiences, the different places they were able to find support on campus, how they utilized them, what some of the challenges or hardships were they dealt with, and even what some of their greatest accomplishments have been. Interpretations of the results are provided in Chapter V including the discussion, recommendations, and conclusion.

## CHAPTER V

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of how first-generation college students identify and utilize on campus resources for support. Also, it was to look at the challenges and success first-generation students have while attending an institution. In this chapter, the results will be discussed from the qualitative study of first-generation college students. This chapter will also include recommendations, as well as areas for future research to help first-generation students continue to be supported within a university setting.

### **Discussion**

The following section looks at how the findings from the current study relate to previous literature that was looked at in chapter II. This section will be broken up into three themes; support, challenge, and success. These themes were based off of the research questions which guided the study. Support will be explored through how the participants found the assistance and how they were supported. Challenge will look at the obstacles the participants faced, as well as gaining an understanding of how they developed through those challenges. Success will identify how the participants perceived achievement and how they attained them.

**Support.** The participants in this study shared that they have felt supported through their transition to and through college. For all of the participants, support began with their family. Felicity talked about how her family was supportive of her going to college and how they wanted her to go. Oliver was pushed away from the military because his family wanted him to get a degree to try and better himself. Both participants

said it was more along the lines of moral support provided to them. Korsmo (2014) discussed how first-generation parents support and want their children to do better and surpass their education background. Davis (2010) in his research identified the parents of first-generation college students are supportive of their children but do not have the knowledge to guide their students through different collegiate challenges. Students in this study discussed how it was difficult to have actual conversations about the things they were going through because their parents had no idea of what they were experiencing and provided less support in identifying strategies for dealing with these situations. Family was important to the students' overall success because they were receiving the positive affirmation they needed to work toward their degree completion.

Within the university setting, avenues of support are very important in order to help further the development of first-generation students. Sanacore and Palumbo (2015) discussed the importance of faculty and staff engaging with first-generation students because they are the individuals this population will have a lot of interaction with throughout their collegiate experience. Each of the participants of this study spoke about experiences with faculty and receiving the help and guidance they needed. Emma and Viola discussed how the faculty helped them with their course work. Other participants spoke of how faculty guided them to other offices on campus and other programs, like Barry utilizing the tutoring program because an instructor told him it would be helpful to his success in a class.

Sanacore and Palumbo (2015) and Covarrubais and Fryberg (2014) not only talked about the importance of the faculty, but they also talked about the importance of the offices and programs offering support services within a campus setting. The studies

looked at how the offices on campus provided assistance with transitioning and supporting the students. These offices are designed to provide guidance and support for students and Felicity and Barry talk about this related to their experiences. Felicity talked about her transition from community college to a four-year institution and how the TRiO program helped her through what would have otherwise been a difficult transition. The TRiO program is one of the programs Covarrubais and Fryberg (2014) specifically identified within their own research. Barry talked about how the writing center and peer tutors were places of support he utilized. Emma and Oliver talked about being a part of a special admissions program where they received the support and guidance they identified they needed. Having a variety of sources for students to turn to is important in meeting the needs of students who come in with different skills and abilities.

Another area of support the participants talked about came through mentors they had established with individuals on campus. Some of them, like Viola, Emma, and Felicity, described how faculty members were there to mentor to them. These instructors offered them ideas and guidance on their academic endeavors and even on personal issues the students were facing. Barry, Oliver, and Felicity talked about their peers and Resident Assistants as active mentors in their lives. Each of the participants talked about how the mentor they had in their life helped set them up to be successful and even guided them toward success at the institution, whether that was getting involved or finding outlets for support. Wang (2012) supported this finding as she discussed in her research how the impact of a mentor within a first-generation student's life can help the student gain an understanding of how to achieve greater success. Wang did not place emphasis

about where the individual receives mentoring from, but rather how that individual supports the student's overall success while in college.

**Challenge.** The participants in this study identified several challenges they have faced thus far in college. This could be seen through the transition they had to make, the mental health issues a few of them had to work through, or the academic struggles almost all of them experienced. Many of the participants saw it as something they had to work through and move past in order to keep going. Olson (2014) said that each first-generation student will have different things they have to overcome, which was identified throughout the participants' stories.

One of the large challenges all of them faced was the difference in academic rigor. Many of the participants spoke about how they knew the coursework would be different, but they were not prepared for such a large change in the effort they would have to put into their work. None of the participants discussed being ill-prepared for college, instead focusing on their own motivation toward the completion of their work. Previous research discussed how first-generation students often are not prepared to attend college (Stephens et al., 2012; Petty, 2014). None of the participants in this study made any comment regarding a lack of academic preparation prior to college, rather they spoke about the difference in work they needed to put in to be successful in their classes. Barry talked about how he found his procrastinating to be the cause of his academic struggles. He came to realize that he needed to change his habits and motivation to do work that would help him maintain good grades. This is similar to Oliver's case as he spoke about how he would do other things first, like hang out with friends, and would put his

academics as his last priority causing him to find out his pattern of what he was doing was going to have a negative impact on him as a student.

*Understanding their developmental progress through challenges.* Another challenge the participants faced was navigating the new environment they were in; this may be best understood by identifying where the participants were in their own development and how they were growing through the challenging new experiences they were facing. For many of the participants, they had to ask where to go to get assistance or they had to determine what they needed on their own. The participants talked about how important the guidance they received helped them achieve success. This was to be expected as they all were just entering the institution. When looking at the work of Chickering and Riesser's (1993), it is apparent that each of the participants was working through the different vectors of their own development. Chickering and Riesser's (1993) theory of identity development helps to understand where each of the participants is developmentally. It also allows some insight as to how first-generation college students handle the challenges they are working through.

Within the first vector, developing competency, Chickering and Riesser (1993) discuss how the individual first develops skills and goals to help them understand what is happening in their lives. The individual is then able to look at how they understand their mind and abilities, as well as how they interact with others. This was very apparent in all of the participants' cases, especially as they talked about wanting to do well academically and seeking support and help as appropriate. They all talked about how the transition to a new environment was something they had to get used to and how to engage with others. Oliver even talked about how at his orientation session, he wished they would have gone



even further in depth with how to integrate one's self into this already established environment.

The second vector, managing emotions, seemed to be a large part of where the participants were in their development. For some of them, this seemed to have the greatest impact on their experiences, as this was the first time they were having to do this on their own. They had to find ways to express what it was they were feeling. Once they were able to identify how to do so, they had to determine who they could go to in order to get the help they needed. They had to find ways to cope with the personal challenges they were dealing with, as well as the academic ones. Each of them said they had to keep pushing through their emotional hardships in order to get to a place where they could be okay with what they were dealing with and overcome it. Chickering and Riesser (1993) state in this vector the individual identifies the emotions they are having. They have to learn ways to express the emotions they are feeling in an appropriate manner, as well as determining how to manage those emotions. Felicity and Oliver found at times the stress and depression they were dealing with would control them in their actions and ideas. It was their ability to develop strong relationships with others, either through the organizations they were in, through floor mates or roommates, or even with faculty members, that helped them get to the point of being able to use their emotions to aid them.

When the participants were dealing with their challenges, they had to determine ways of getting the assistance they needed. For Felicity, it was seeking out the assistance of the counseling center to help with her homesickness. Viola, Barry, and Emma sought out the help of the faculty members they had in classes in order to help with improving

skills and providing clarification on things to do. Chickering and Reisser (1993) would say at this stage the participants were moving through autonomy toward interdependence. In this vector, the individual is learning how to have self-direction, as well as learning to problem solve. The participants were starting to figure out they were able to take matters into their own hands and find the assistance they need. This helps them start to build relationships with those around them, which leads to the next vector of developing mature interpersonal relationships.

For the first-generation students in the study, developing mature interpersonal relationships was given a lot of attention through the interviews. They relied on the people they interacted with to overcome the challenges they were facing. For first-generation students, having these relationships allowed them to overcome some of the more challenging experiences they faced. In Viola's case, the relationship she had with her floor mates and Resident Assistant helped her overcome the homesickness she faced during her first year of college. Chickering and Reisser's (1993) theory of development does consist of seven vectors with the last three not being evident in the participants due to the fact that they were only in their second year of college.

**Success.** All of the participants talked about how they measured their success through course work and through academic achievement. Through their success, each was able to find a form of happiness in the work they had done and how they were able to motivate themselves to accomplish it. Much of the research done with first-generation students talks about how they motivate themselves to become successful or who assists them in gaining their success (Petty, 2014; Wang 2012). A couple of the participants, Barry and Felicity, talked about how they did not want to end up in careers or jobs where

they were not able to excel and move up. They both felt it was important to know they had access to mobility within the work environment.

Petty (2014) discussed how for first-generation college students success is graduation. Barry was the only participant who stated graduation was his main goal, which he used to identify as his personal success. For the others, it was the smaller achievements, like passing a class or completing a large assignment. This may be due to the fact that they were in the middle of their second year in college and at this time graduation seems far away. In Chickering and Reisser's (1993) theory of development, the sixth vector is developing purpose, and they explain that this is experienced by those who are further along in their growth as an adult. For the participants in this study, it was the smaller successes that they claimed and spoke about because that is where they are developmentally. The perfect example of this is Felicity. She was able to find her independence, which she felt was a success, which led her to getting involved and finding her place at the institution.

### **Recommendations**

Based on an analysis of the results, these recommendations were created with first-generation students' best interest in mind and how they can be more supported within the institutional setting. The participants felt the institution was doing what it could to meet their needs, but they saw there could be areas of improvement. These recommendations will hopefully help the institution continue to create a more supportive environment.

**Resource Outreach.** The participants stated most of the resources they utilized they learned about through word of mouth. Felicity was the only one who discussed

utilizing advertising and going online to get the help she needed. Many of the participants had limited knowledge of resources outside of those they had utilized. Covarrubias and Fryberg (2011) stressed the importance of having support offices on campus for students because they will assist them through the various challenges they face during college. If no one is utilizing them or know what their function is they are not doing what they are designed to do. These offices would benefit from regularly assessing how they are being utilized and the ways in which people are learning about their services. It would also be helpful for offices to be intentional in how they inform students about the services they provide. This could be done in a multitude of ways. One way this could be done is through a resource fair, where students could come and learn about the different resources on campus. Many campuses provide student involvement fairs but these are focused on ways to get involved, not on how to get assistance when you need it. Different resource offices on campus could also do outreach within the residence halls to meet the students where they live, bringing the services directly to the students. Another way resources could be pushed is through more advertising. Offices should have a plan for how students can find out about what they do, which could include posters, web presence, along with social media.

Not only is it important for the offices themselves to be visible within the university setting but it is equally, if not more important for the people in those offices to be visible. The participants continually discussed the importance they placed on the interactions they had with different individuals. It is important to make sure the people working in the different offices are available to these students. This could allow for relationships to start to flourish and can help foster the sense of support the students were

looking for. This needs to start happening as soon as the student comes on campus, most likely through orientation, as this will be the first time the student is actively engaging with the institution. Once starting at the institution, it is then important for those previously established relationships to continue but then for new ones to develop, like with residence hall staff, faculty, and others. It is recommended that those individuals are trained on how to be intentional with their interactions and understand how to develop a connection that is supportive.

**First Year Experience Program.** Many of the participants talked about going to get help because they had someone directing them. This may be because they do not know where to start when looking for support. This may not be just a first-generation trend though and could be a trend seen among all freshman students (Jamelske, 2008). A first year experience course or seminar class could be quite beneficial to guiding students through their transition and acclimation to the institution. This course would help them understand the academic culture as well as the ways in which they can become more involved at the institution. In this course, participants would be provided with direct information regarding resources and information about different offices and services available to them on campus. Having an outlet for students who share similar identities to meet and not feel secluded from others at the institution would be a benefit to all. This would ensure the students are getting a strong foundation to support them during all stages of the academic career.

### **Recommendations for Future Research.**

The following recommendations are being made for future studies when it comes to resources being used by first-generation students and how they can work through

challenges or gain success. As this is just one study, further research on this topic needs to be conducted in order to continue to gain a better understanding. It should be looked at from different perspectives, like from traditional students' or administrators' point of view, research type, or even institution size. By doing so, it will help institutions better serve their students.

The participants were able to talk about the resources they used as well as how they were supported through their college experience. It would be interesting to see if the resources and experiences the participants discussed were similar to those of traditional students. Identifying what similarities and differences students who are not first-generation with those that are would be worth researching.

As all of the participants were sophomore students, they have had a limited time thus far to explore all of what the campus has to offer. Many of the participants talked about how at different times they were using different resources to assist their progress. By studying the same students over a period of time, it would be interesting to see what resources they use over the course of their time at the institution and if there are specific resources that are utilized at various times based on their needs.

All of the participants discussed how being at a smaller institution, they were able to make closer connections with faculty and staff. This allowed for them to have a greater sense of support because of those close connections. Conducting this type of research on a larger college campus would provide interesting insights. It would be intriguing to see how much engagement happens between the students and faculty, since that was prevalent in this study. It would also be interesting to see whether they utilize similar resources and get to those resources in the same way as the participants in this study did.

It would also be important to identify if there are different resources that are utilized by students at a larger institution.

This study was conducted to understand first-generation college students and their experiences and how they have utilized various offices and individuals on campus to help support them. Conducting a study from the perspective of the administrators would offer insight on the other side of this relationship. It would offer information about how staff members feel they are effective when it comes to what they do for first-generation college students, as well as others. Research of this type would help in understanding their awareness of the challenges first-generation college students face when coming to an institution and how different entities are able to help overcome those various challenges. It could potentially offer up new ideas as to how to be more affective when engaging with students.

## **Conclusion**

Prior to this research, it was understood that first-generation students have a difficult time transitioning to, and understanding, an institution of higher education. When getting to a campus, it is crucial for a first-generation student to get the support they need in order to be successful and graduate. While parents are able to provide moral support, they are not able to fully assist them when it comes to a university setting. This qualitative study was carried out to better understand how first-generation college students are supported on campus. The main purpose was to see how first-generation students found support and then how they were assisted. In this study, the first-generation students found support from faculty and peers. Those individuals directed them to other resources on campus, such as specific offices and other individuals. The first-generation

students in this study did utilize the resources available to them on campus and they used them to help handle their challenges.

The study also looked at how first-generation college students identified their success during their first year and found that the successes they had were based around their academics. Based on the results of this study, institutions should continue to provide outreach and services that will support the students throughout their time in college. Additionally, providing some sort of first year experience program would benefit the greatest number of students. First year students do experience success while in college and this comes from the support of family, friends, faculty, and mentors in addition to support offices provided by the institution. When first year students use these resources, they are able meet the challenges they face throughout college.



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## **Appendix A**

### **Sample E-mail to Participants**

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Taylor Whittington, a graduate student in the College Student Affairs program at Eastern Illinois University, and Dr. Dianne Timm, faculty member of College Student Affairs program. You are being asked to participate because you have been identified as a second year first-generation student attending Eastern Illinois University. The purpose of this study is to investigate the support first-generation students receive through on campus services.

If you are interested in participating, please reply to this e-mail confirming or declining your participation. I will follow up with available times to schedule an interview, if you confirm to be a participant.

The interview is expected to last 30minutes, in hopes of understanding your experiences during your freshman year. You may answer only the questions you are comfortable with answering related to the study. The interview will help assist higher education personnel and administration gain a better understanding of how students can be successful during their first year.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may withdraw at any time from the study. If you decline from the study, it will not affect you in any way. Please ask any questions you may have about the study, in order to determine whether or not you would like to participate. Any information obtained during the interview will be kept confidential and anonymous and will be disclosed only with your permission. The data will be kept locked in a filing cabinet in the researchers' office, in which only the researchers (Taylor Whittington and Dr. Dianne Timm) will have access to.

If you have any questions about the research study, please contact Taylor Whittington, at (618) 781-0680, or at [tewhittington@eiu.edu](mailto:tewhittington@eiu.edu); or Dr. Dianne Timm, at 217-581-5327, or [dtimm@eiu.edu](mailto:dtimm@eiu.edu).

Thank you in advance and I look forward to hearing from you!

Taylor Whittington

## **Appendix B**

### **Interview Protocol**

- 1) Tell me about your experience in selecting a college?
  - a. How were you supported?
  - b. What did you learn about the institution as you researched it?
  - c. What resources do you remember being told about?
- 2) Tell me about your experience at this institution in the year and a half you have been here.
- 3) In what ways have you been oriented to campus?
  - a. What information were you told?
  - b. What sorts of resources were you told about?
  - c. What information do you wish you had been told about during your orientation to the campus?
- 4) Tell me about your freshman year.
  - a. Tell me about the greatest challenge you faced last year?
    - i. What did you do in that situation?
      1. Were there any resources, people, offices you utilized in that situation? Why?
    - ii. What did you learn from that experience? How has that experience changed you? Or your experience?
  - b. Tell me about the greatest success you faced last year?
    - i. What led you to that success?
    - ii. What did you learn from that experience? How has that experience changed you? Or your experience

iii. What does success look like to you personally?

iv. As you came in to your sophomore year what things did you want to change to set yourself up for success?

5) What resources are you aware of on campus?

a. Have you utilized any of these resources? Why or why not?

6) Tell me about the resources you utilize on campus.

a. When do you utilize them?

Why do you use them?

b. How did you learn about them?

c. What would you tell a new student about them?

7) Who do you look up to on campus? How did you meet this person?

a. Do you have a mentor? Do you consider them a mentor?

b. How have they helped you?

8) In what ways is your experience at the institution different from your classmates?

Please describe.

9) What could the institution do better to help set you up for success?



## **Appendix C**

### **CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH**

#### **First-Generation 2<sup>nd</sup> year College Students and Support Gained from Campus Services**

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Taylor Whittington, a graduate College Student Affairs student at Eastern Illinois University, who is working under the supervision of Dr. Dianne Timm, a professor from the Counseling and Student Development Department at Eastern Illinois University. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Please ask questions about anything you do not understand or is unclear, before deciding whether or not to participate. You will be one of six participants in the study.

- **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this study is to examine how students whose parents did not receive a higher education degree utilize on campus services in order to achieve success.

- **PROCEDURES**

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview lasting roughly a half an hour to forty-five minutes where you will discuss being the first in your family to go to college and the success you achieved during your first year. All information during the interview will be audio recorded. You will be asked numerous open-ended questions during the interview session and will be encouraged to give honest feedback during each question.

- **POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

The risks associated with the study are no greater than those associated with daily life.

- **POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY**

By volunteering in the one-on-one interviews, recommendations about students whose parents didn't receive a degree can be made to university officials as to how to help aid them in being successful. Also, helping campus services gain a better understanding of what services you do and do not use.

- **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of using false names in order to protect your identity. Once all data and research has been conducted the files will be locked in a filing cabinet within the Principal Investigators office. The only individuals who will have access to the information which could be used to identify you are the Principal Investigator and Dr. Timm. After three years, the data will be destroyed.

- **PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

Participation in this research study is completely voluntary and not a requirement or a condition for being the recipient of benefits or services from Eastern Illinois University or any other organization sponsoring the research project. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind or loss of benefits or services to which you are otherwise entitled. There is no penalty if you withdraw from the study and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer.

- **IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS**

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, please contact:

Taylor Whittington  
618-781-0680 (Phone)  
tewhittington@eiu.edu (Email)

Dr. Dianne Timm  
217-581-5327 (Phone)  
dtimm@eiu.edu (Email)

- **RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS**

If you have any questions or concerns about the treatment of human participants in this study, you may call or write:

Institutional Review Board  
Eastern Illinois University  
600 Lincoln Ave.

Charleston, IL 61920  
Telephone: (217) 581-8576  
E-mail: eiurb@www.eiu.edu

You will be given the opportunity to discuss any questions about your rights as a research subject with a member of the IRB. The IRB is an independent committee composed of members of the University community, as well as lay members of the community not connected with EIU. The IRB has reviewed and approved this study.

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I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation at any time. I have been given a copy of this form.

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Printed Name of Participant

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Signature of Participant

Date